



# Research Update

## A Question of Sport

Dirk Schubotz, Katrina Lloyd and Martina McKnight

### Introduction

In recent years ARK's Young Life and Times (YLT) and Kids' Life and Times (KLT) surveys have included a range of health-related questions, such as wellbeing and nutrition in KLT and physical, mental and sexual health in YLT. While these are important issues, the children and young people participating in the surveys have often suggested that we should ask them about their hobbies and their involvement in sport. We were therefore delighted when we were approached by Sport Northern Ireland in 2015 with a request to include modules in the YLT and KLT surveys that asked children and young people about their experiences of sport and leisure time activities. While undoubtedly health-related, these activities are also, for most children and young people, fun to do and interesting to answer survey questions on!

The fact that moderate and regular sport and physical activity are related to physical and mental health benefits is uncontested. Children and young people are, therefore, encouraged to be physically active for at least 60 minutes every day. However, the questions included in the Sport Northern Ireland module not only asked respondents whether or not they met this physical activity target, but they also asked about their experiences of sport inside and outside of school, the type of activity they were involved in, barriers to participation and a question about inspiring role models and their sports idols. The research sought to inform Sport Northern Ireland's policy mission to lead sports development at all levels, i.e. to encourage more participation and at the same time to produce more winners in competitive sports.

The 2015 KLT survey was completed by 5194 Primary 7 (P7) children, while 1157

16-year olds responded to YLT. The questions were similar across the two surveys although the wording of some of the items differed to reflect the age difference between respondents. This Research Update presents the main findings from the two surveys and, where appropriate, makes comparisons between the responses of the P7 children and their older counterparts.

#### *Everyday activities and physical activity targets*

Respondents were asked about the type of physical activities they do in a normal week. This was a multiple response question, as some children and young people may be involved in more than one activity. As Table 1 shows, 42 percent of YLT and 49 percent of KLT respondents reported that they walked or cycled to and from school. Slightly higher proportions of respondents in both the YLT (44%) and the KLT (53%) surveys said they did PE in school in a normal week. Over half of YLT respondents (52%) and nearly

three quarters (74%) of KLT respondents said they were involved in out-of-school sport. Fewer than one in ten YLT respondents (8%), but nearly one in five KLT respondents (19%) said they did none of these things in a typical week, whilst one in five KLT respondents, but only nine percent of YLT respondents said they did all of these activities in a normal week. However, when asked how many days in a normal week they spent at least 60 minutes on sport or physical activity, the reverse was true. Less than one in ten (9%) 16-year olds met the seven-times-a-week target, compared with almost one third of P7 children (32%). This would suggest that many P7 children meet the target of physical activity during unstructured play, which would be supported by previous findings in the 2013 KLT survey which showed that the most common activity children engage in after school is playing outside (65% said they did this). Sixteen-year olds, on the other hand, appear to be more reliant on structured physical activity to meet the activity target.

**Table 1: Activities in a normal week (multiple response)**

	%	
	YLT	KLT
Walk/cycle to school	42	49
Do PE in school	44	53
Sport/activities outside school	52	74
Any other physical activity	30	N/A
None of these	8	19

**Table 2: Reasons preventing YLT and KLT respondents from taking part in sport (multiple response)**

	%	
	YLT	KLT
Not enough time	69	25
Poor health or a disability	4	20
I don't have anyone I can go with	23	15
Difficulty getting there	26	N/A
Cost	24	N/A
I don't know where I can do activities	13	38
Other reason	7	N/A
Nothing stops or prevents me	9	12

### Prohibiting factors

As **Table 2** shows, the single most important factor why 16-year olds were not more involved in sports and physical activity was lack of time, with seven in ten (69%) of YLT respondents saying this. This was more than twice the proportion of KLT respondents (25%) who blamed lack of time for their inactivity. The main reason given by P7 children was a lack

of knowledge about where they could undertake activities, which highlights their reliance on parents to organise sport for them.

### Enjoyment of sport and physical activity

Children and young people were asked how much they enjoyed taking part in

sport and physical activity. **Figure 1** shows that P7 children were much more likely than 16-year olds to say that they enjoyed the activities they took part in. This difference was particularly noticeable for PE in school, which 82 percent of KLT respondents, but only 37 percent of YLT respondents, said they enjoyed a lot. The difference between KLT and YLT respondents was smallest in relation to outdoor adventure activities which both sets of respondents enjoyed to a similar extent (**Figure 1**).

### Types of sport and activities

Children and young people were asked to say what three types of sport or physical activity they most often undertake. The types of sport mentioned covered an extensive range of activities, with football, swimming and Gaelic sports being the three top activities for KLT respondents, whilst walking, running and football were just ahead of going to the gym and cycling for 16-year olds. It is noticeable that four out of the five top activities for 16-year olds were physical activities that tend to be undertaken individually at a time that suits their personal circumstances. This was not the case for KLT respondents. Perhaps this is evidence of an increasing trend towards the individualisation of sport and physical activity.

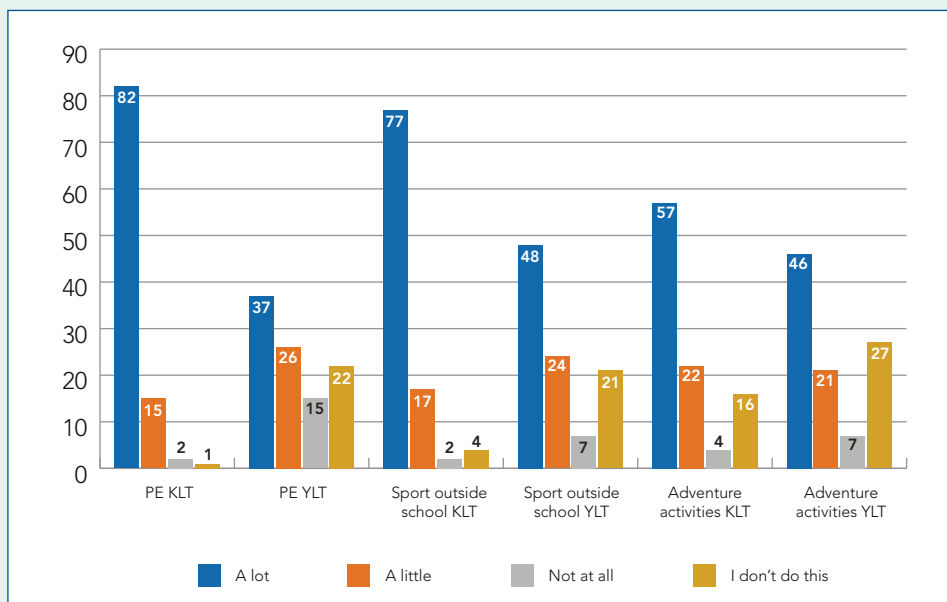
### Perceived health effects of sport

Both KLT and YLT respondents were asked whether they thought sport had benefits for their physical and mental health. **Table 3** shows that only a very small minority of respondents in both surveys thought that there were no benefits at all. Five times as many KLT respondents as YLT respondents were unsure about both the physical and the mental health benefits of sport, and in both surveys the proportion of respondents unsure about mental health benefits was twice as high as the proportion unsure about physical health benefits but, overall, these proportions were very small indeed.

### Role models and sports idols

It may be that one of the main motivations for young people to become involved in sport is role models that they see and hear about in the media. Famous sports men

**Figure 1: How much do you enjoy the following activities? (%)**



**Table 3: Respondents' perceptions about the level of health benefits of sport**

	%			
	Physical health		Mental health	
	KLT	YLT	KLT	YLT
<b>A lot</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>86</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>65</b>
<b>A little</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>Not at all</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>I don't know</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>2</b>

**Table 4: Who has encouraged or inspired you to take part in sports? (multiple response)**

	%	
	YLT	KLT
<b>My family</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>A teacher</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>My friends</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>A famous person</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>Someone else</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>No-one has inspired or encouraged me</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>20</b>

and women enjoy celebrity status and many children and young people treat them as idols as witnessed, for example, by the numbers who wear personalised football and rugby shirts. The children and young people responding to KLT and YLT were asked to name their sports role models and idols and, for P7s, Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo were by far those most commonly recorded. In contrast, a more diverse group of role models were identified by YLT respondents and there was a notable gender effect. Jessica Ennis-Hill was the most commonly named sports idol among YLT respondents, as many females named her as a role model, whilst the male vote among 16-year olds was heavily split not just among different football players, but stars from different types of sport.

However, as **Table 4** shows, the role of famous sports persons as a motivating factor to become involved in sport decreases significantly with age.

P7 children were most likely to say that a famous person inspired them to take part in sport (45%) with only 19 percent of KLT respondents saying a family member inspired them. At age 16, famous sports personalities were the least likely people reported to inspire someone to be physically active, with only 16 percent of YLT respondents taking inspiration from sports stars. In fact, 62 percent of YLT respondents said that they did not have a sports idol at all. At the age of 16, family members were the main role models for young people (59%), followed by friends. Indeed, at this age, friends were more

than twice as important as they were for P7 children. The role of a teacher in inspiring children to be physically active is also clear in **Table 4**; and, while this role model appears to decrease with age, nonetheless, more than one in four YLT respondents (27%) still reported that a teacher had encouraged or inspired them to take part in sport.

There is a very strong link between self-assessed health and the level of physical activity respondents are involved in. Half of YLT respondents who were physically active at least to the recommended level said their health was excellent, whilst a further third thought it was good. In comparison, 47 percent who were never, or for only one day a week, physically active for the recommended 60 minutes said that their health was just fair, with a further 15% saying it was poor. The results were similar for KLT respondents. Ninety-three percent of those who were active to the recommended level or above said their health was at least good, whereas this was the case for only 78 percent of KLT respondents who said they never completed the recommended level of activity.

### *Gender difference*

The main variable that impacted on the experiences of and attitudes to sport and physical activity was respondents' gender, and this was the case for both the KLT and the YLT surveys (Figures 2 and 3). Figure 2 shows that whilst 16-year old males were more likely to be active to the level that is recommended, females were much more likely than males to say that they would like to do much more sport. The figure also shows that males were more likely than females to value competitiveness in sport whilst three quarters of females had no sports idol compared with half of males.

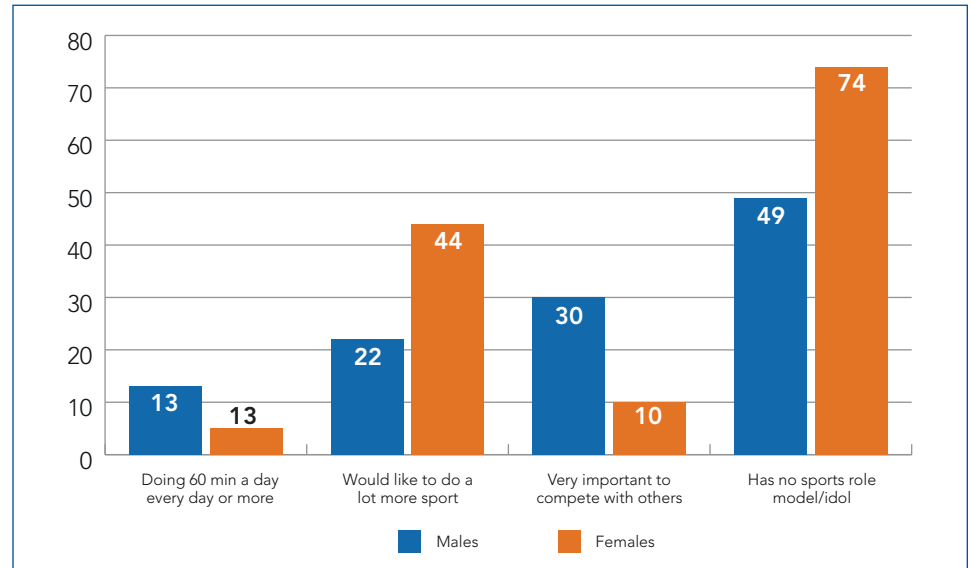
This was similar to the P7 KLT respondents. As **Figure 3** shows males were much more likely to have a sports idol than their female counterparts, but the most significant finding in this figure is perhaps that boys appear to be much more likely to be encouraged to do sport at that age than girls (24% and 15% respectively).

## Disability and sport

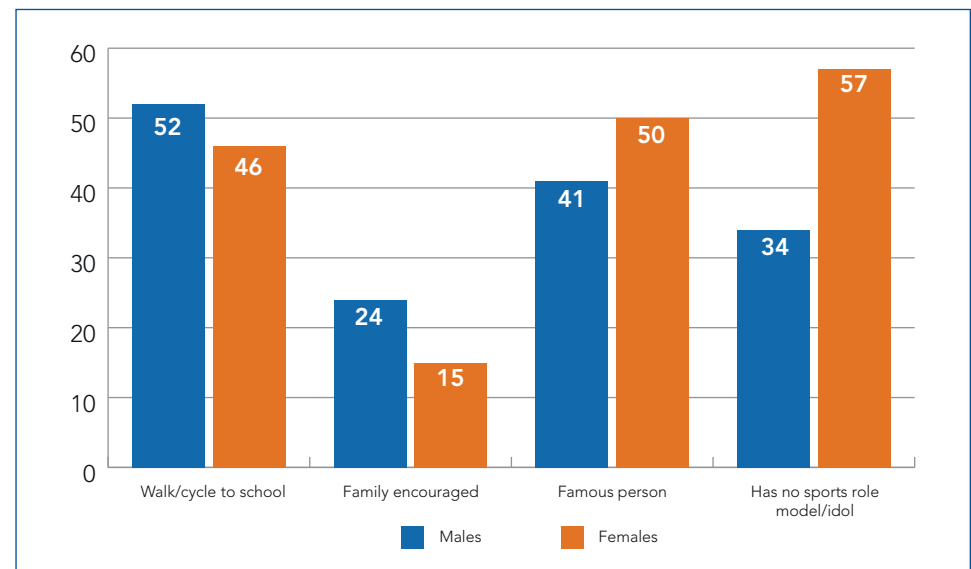
We found some differences in relation to disability and children and young people's participation in sport. Interestingly, respondents with a disability or long-term health condition were just as likely as those without such a condition to meet the daily 60-minutes activity target, and this was the case for both P7 children and 16-year olds. One in five YLT respondents with a disability or long-term health condition said that this condition prevented them from taking part in more sport. This figure was only marginally smaller for KLT respondents with a long-term illness (17%); however, unlike their 16-year old counterparts, KLT respondents without a long-term illness were just as likely to say this.

Sixteen-year olds with a disability or long-term illness were less likely to participate in PE and much less likely to say that they enjoyed PE in school. KLT respondents with a long-term illness were also less likely to say that they enjoyed PE; however, they were just as likely to take part in PE as children without a long-term illness. YLT respondents with a long-term illness were also less likely to participate in organised sport outside of school; again, we did not find this among the P7 children.

**Figure 2: Gender difference in physical activity (YLT)**



**Figure 3: Gender difference in physical activity (KLT)**



## Key points

- Almost one third of P7 children, but less than one in ten 16-year olds meet target of 60 minutes of physical activity per day.
- The main factor that prevented 16-year olds from doing more sports was lack of time, whereas for P7 children it was a lack of knowledge about where activities took place.
- P7 children were much more likely than 16-year olds to say that they enjoyed sports.
- Famous sports people and teachers were the main role models for P7s who encouraged them to take part in sport. For 16-year olds, the main role models were family members and friends.
- There were significant gender differences for children and young people in the way in which they take part in sports at school and are encouraged to take part in sports.
- Both children and young people were aware of the health benefits of sport, and those who reported the highest levels of physical activity were significantly more likely to report good health.

In collaboration with Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University

Magee Campus, Ulster University  
Northland Road, Londonderry BT48 7JL  
Tel: 028 7167 5500  
E-mail: info@ark.ac.uk

School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work  
Queen's University Belfast, Belfast BT7 1NN  
Tel: 028 9097 3034  
E-mail: info@ark.ac.uk